

Reach the Mind, Reach the World

by Zane Yi

Abstract

A vital part of reaching students on campus is to engage and equip them intellectually. Students need resources that help them understand, articulate, and live out their Christian faith in a secular and pluralistic society. These are typically part of the curriculum and also campus options on public campuses. Currently students on Adventist campuses have markedly less exposure and understanding of faith issues in the public square. Here are practical suggestions for both Adventist and non-Adventist campuses in this regard. Of course there are differences, and ministry is important in both contexts. Rather than removing one's self from the discussion, engage in it. Helpful resources are available.

Introduction

Beyond addressing pastoral needs, honing the right theological message and emphasis, or developing the most relevant methods and programs, *intellectually engaging* and *equipping* students is an essential component of effectively ministering to college students on both the Adventist and non-Adventist campus. Instead of getting overly technical (and intellectual!), I will support this claim informally by sharing numerous personal experiences. I will also provide examples of how this can be done.¹

Reaching the Mind on the Non-Adventist Campus

There are many reasons a young person might leave the church during one's college years—social pressure, lifestyle choices that are seemingly incongruent with one's upbringing, negative personal interactions with church members, etc. For several of my friends that grew up with me in the church, however, the primary reasons were intellectual. Furthermore, the struggle was not with an aspect of Adventist doctrine, but with a basic teaching of the Christian faith. One friend from academy enrolled at a non-Adventist university and took a course in the Old Testament that challenged many of the things he had heard about the Bible as a child and teen. The other, also studying at that same university, had questions emerge over dinner with some friends. During the course of the

conversation, someone from a different religious tradition pointed out that the only reason my friend was a Christian was because she had been born into a Christian family. This comment opened the floodgates to many more questions.

The experiences of my friends are not unique; I believe having access to intellectual resources (books, lectures, a minister trained to address such issues, etc.) during this time would have kept both of my friends connected to the faith.

I currently serve as a volunteer to a student group at Columbia University. Last year we read a book on apologetics at our weekly meetings. The book addressed many of the questions the author has encountered while ministering to New Yorkers over the past fifteen years. Some basic questions are addressed in a thoughtful way, such as:

Why does God allow suffering in the world?

How can one religion be "right" and the others "wrong"?

Why have so many wars been fought in the name of God?²

The reaction to the book by the students has been interesting. Some want to come to meetings for a simple Bible study. It is disorienting for them to hear a Christian author that sounds so much like some of their non-religious teachers. Others become immediately engaged. "Hey, that's exactly what my professor/roommate said the other day!" a couple of

them have exclaimed. They begin to talk differently as the issues they are dealing with on campus seem to connect with their faith. Instead of sitting listless and repeating “safe,” religious-sounding clichés, they actively participate in the discussion.

Beyond retention, however, engaging students intellectually is vital for reaching non-Christian students. Last year we encouraged our students to attend a Veritas Forum when we found out another student organization on campus was organizing it.³ I was able to join some of the undergraduate students on the second night. The speaker, William Lane Craig, gave a lecture on the historical reliability of the Gospels and the resurrection of Jesus. The students from our group were spell-bound by what some might have thought was a very dry (and long) lecture! The forum also included presentations addressing social issues like the sex trade and global poverty. Events like these are not only relevant to Christian students themselves, but ones that they could feel comfortable and confident inviting their non-Christian friends. I discovered that the previous evening, the presenter had debated a non-Christian philosophy professor on the question of “Can you be moral without God?”

Organizing an event like the Veritas Forum is no small task, and the possibility of partnering with other groups to organize such an event may not be feasible for all groups. With this in mind, I’d like to give another example of how intellectual engagement and resourcing might be done on a smaller scale.

A few years ago, when I served as a campus minister at the University of Tennessee, I continued to participate in and support something my predecessor, Ron Pickell, had started during his tenure. He had organized a book club called the Theist Club. Every week graduate students and campus ministers from other organizations would gather at the Adventist Student Center to discuss a book. The books we read in the two years I was a part of the group dealt with issues like post-modernism, the historical Jesus, and religious pluralism. Aside from the wonderful conversations and friendships that developed from this group, I believe the fact that this club was hosted at an Adventist Student Center did much to leave a positive impression in the minds of the thoughtful non-Adventists that gathered there.

These experiences, and others like them, have convinced me of the need to intellectually engage students and to provide them with adequate resources (books, studies, events, presenters, discussion venues, etc.) that encourage them to ask and grapple with serious questions. Of course, none of these substitutes for the campus minister who has wrestled personally with the questions and can address these questions in the context of student interactions.

Reaching the Mind on the Adventist Campus

I am a product of Adventist higher-education. In this section, however, I want to use my experiences in non-Adventist educational settings to address ministry on Adventist ones. Realizing that many of the ideas in the previous section can be replicated on an Adventist campus, I want to focus on a deeper issue.

At Columbia University, all students are required to take classes from the core curriculum.⁴ During one’s sophomore year, all students, regardless of major, take a year-long course entitled “Contemporary Civilization in the West” where they read and engage major philosophical and literary classics. Just this past semester, I was surprised to see one of the student leaders from our fellowship walking into the weekly meeting with copies of works by the philosophers Hegel and Nietzsche.

At Fordham University, where I’m currently a graduate student, and where I teach introductory classes in philosophy, all students, once again, regardless of major, during the freshman and sophomore years, are required to take an introduction to philosophy class and also one in philosophical ethics. In these classes, students read works by authors like Plato, Aquinas, Descartes and Hume and learn the basic skills needed for understanding and critically engaging ideas. They debate issues like abortion, gay marriage, the environment, and religion. In addition to these classes, they all take a course from the religion department called “Faith and Critical Reasoning.”⁵ I was surprised that in some sections of the course, they are reading books like *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins.⁶

I can't help but reflect on my own undergraduate experience and compare it to that of my students. While I appreciate many aspects of the education I received, I realize now that I was woefully unprepared to engage the world of ideas. By the time I graduated from my Adventist college, I had not even heard of some of the authors my undergraduate students are required to read, let alone what they said. My students are reading works their freshmen and sophomore year that I, embarrassingly, did not read until I was in graduate school!

Beyond the basic issue of providing a quality liberal arts education that addresses basic questions any inquisitive college student is asking, our denomination faces serious challenges as graduates from our own institutions go out into society unprepared to dialogue intelligently on important social matters with peers who have been educated elsewhere. We are equally unprepared to discuss spiritual matters on the level of others.

Consider the challenges that will confront our denomination as more and more Adventist students receive their education at high-caliber non-Adventist institutions, and yet are ministered to by pastors that have been trained largely in Adventist ones.⁷ Meeting these challenges will take more than offering a basic apologetics course. We need to revisit the core curriculum at our institutions of higher learning with the intent of providing courses that teach students the basic ideas of important figures, equip them to engage these ideas, and also challenge them to think critically about pressing issues that face our church and society at large.

The reticence to do this, I realize, is the fear of how some of these ideas might negatively impact the faith of students who are exposed to them. Some perceive Adventist colleges as a citadel of protection from the outside world. However, these fears, as well-intentioned as they are, betray a misunderstanding of the nature of faith (which is not synonymous with epistemological certainty) and also a lack of awareness of the resources within the Christian tradition to respond to serious intellectual inquiry.

Is it possible that, presently, instead of preparing our students to engage and even thrive in the real world, we are intellectually crippling them with

ignorance and fear, making it impossible for them to function outside the Adventist subculture? And what are the spiritual ramifications? We need to shift our focus to *preparing* students to engage the world, not just *protecting* them from it. Everyone must grapple with the world of ideas at some point in life. What better place to do this than at a Christian university, surrounded by instructors and peers that profess faith?

Conclusion

Recently, I was surprised, actually shocked, to see someone at church. Just a few months ago a young man I hadn't seen in over five years walked through the doors. He had moved to New York after graduating from the University of Tennessee and through the internet had found the church I currently attend. Back then he was one of those students that I had to constantly call up and take out to eat, but one that never seemed too interested in participating in anything else.

A few weeks later I was surprised again when he apologized to me for never getting a book I had loaned him back to me. I had forgotten about it. He had read it and found it so helpful that he had given it to a friend. He pulled from his bag a new copy of the book and gave it to me. In this book, through a series of letters, a young man addresses the difficult questions his father has about Christianity.⁸

I realize there are many reasons this young man is in church today. The social and more directly "spiritual" components of campus ministry, along with the ministry of the local church, his family, and ultimately, the grace of God are all relevant factors to take into consideration. However, I like to think that the book that I handed him over lunch all those years ago played an important role in keeping him connected to his faith during his college years.

As we work with students we should encourage questions, critical thinking, and intellectual exploration. We would do well to show them how cultivating one's thought life is a part of faith and a service to God. We must provide them with relevant resources and encourage them to learn from others. In the long run, this can only enrich their lives, deepen their faith in God, and their witness for God in the world.

Endnotes

- ¹There are two books that effectively address the issue of the intellectual life and Christian faith—Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994, and J.P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997.
- ²Tim Keller. *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. New York: Dutton, 2008.
- ³See <http://www.veritas.org> for more information about this organization. See also a book edited by the founder of Veritas, Kelly Monroe, *Finding God at Harvard: Spiritual Journeys of Thinking Christians*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008.
- ⁴For more information about the core curriculum at Columbia University, see <http://www.college.columbia.edu/core>.
- ⁵For information about the core curriculum at Fordham University, see http://www.fordham.edu/academics/colleges__graduate_s/undergraduate_colleg/fordham_college_at_r/core_curriculum/index.asp.
- ⁶Richard Dawkins. *The God Delusion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- ⁷This is not to say that every minister in the Adventist church is one that has attended an Adventist undergraduate institution. This seems to be the general trend from my personal perspective. For the latest trends in Adventist education in North America, see Alita Byrd, “The Changing Landscape of Adventist Higher Education in North America”, *Spectrum*, 37.2, (2009), 37-50. See also Jimmy Phillips, “The Invisible Majority,” *Adventist Review*, (Sept. 20, 2007) 8-13.
- ⁸Gregory Boyd and Edward Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic: A Son Wrestles with His Father's Questions about Christianity*. Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008. The book was originally printed in 1994 by a different publisher.